

Audio Transcript: United States Department of Justice Community Relations Service

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**On Common Ground Episode. 3 Community and Law Enforcement Engagement
09/09/2014**

Opening Voice Over:

Welcome to the US Department of Justice Community Relations Service podcast series "On Common Ground." This series of podcasts is intended to profile successful problem-solving approaches to common challenges confronting cities and towns throughout the country and to further cultural professionalism.

Linda Ortiz:

Hi I'm Linda Ortiz. I'm a Conciliation Specialist at the Department of Justice Community Relations Service. Today we'll be exploring best practices and models for community and law enforcement engagement. I'm joined by Jennifer Murray who's the Deputy County Administrator for Sonoma County. Jennifer welcome to the program.

Jennifer Murray:

Hi Linda. Thanks for this opportunity.

Linda Ortiz:

Jennifer, why don't you describe a bit the circumstances that led to the creation of the Community and Law Enforcement Task Force that exists now in Sonoma County.

Jennifer Murray:

Linda, I'll be glad to. Last October a Sheriff's Deputy shot and killed a 13-year-old boy who was carrying an airsoft rifle designed as a replica assault rifle. This absolutely shocked our community that something like this could happen here.

Linda Ortiz:

Jennifer, what was the environment like in Sonoma County post the shooting?

Jennifer Murray:

Well, people had a range of emotion. They were shocked. They were outraged. They were saddened. They were angry. They just could not understand or believe that this could ever have happened here. Individuals began organizing protests. They called for the firing and criminal prosecution of the deputy involved in the incident. The community also began turning a vacant lot, in the neighborhood where the boys lived and we're shooting took place, into a memorial shrine. The community's grief was palpable. You could just feel it.

Linda Ortiz:

So what did county officials do after the incident to address these community concerns?

Jennifer Murray:

Before I answer that, let me give you a little bit of information about how county's are structured in California. In California counties are governed by boards of supervisors. On November the 5th at the first meeting of the Board of Supervisors, following the incident, the board opened it's meeting with a community healing session. They invited members of the community to speak with them and share their views on the tragedy. They also hoped this would identify ways for the community to heal. In organizing the session, the county reached out to community partners, including representatives from the faith-based community to participate and to help frame and put in a way that would be healing and support moving forward in a positive ways. That morning, for over three hours, members of the community shared their thoughts on the tragedy and its impact on the community. And from that session the Board directed county staff to synthesize the comments shared that morning and to propose actions in 3 areas. Actions that the Board of Supervisors itself might take. Actions staff was directed to complete. And actions the Board wished a Community Task Force to carry out. Thus, the Community and Local Law Enforcement Task Force was born.

Linda Ortiz:

Jennifer, it sounds like there was a lot to work on part of the community to make sure that these issues and concerns were addressed. Are there any type subcommittees created by the Task Force?

Jennifer Murray:

First let me tell you a little bit about how the Task Force was created. The task force was created by action of the Board of Supervisors, by way of a charter document. The document identifies 4 specific charges the Task Force is tasked with in making recommendations back to the Board of Supervisors. The Task Force is comprised of 21 community members and they are asked to make recommendations to the Board on the potential Citizen Review or Citizen Oversight Board for local law enforcement. They are tasked to review and make recommendations about community policing. They've been asked to review whether the county should separate the duties of the Office Coroner from the Office of Sheriff. And the Task Force is tasked with bringing to the attention of the Board of Supervisors any additional feedback on issues that merit County attention. The Task Force has been asked to complete it's work by the end of the calendar year 2014 and return with recommendations to the Board of Supervisors.

Now, I can tell you a little bit about how the Task Force operates. The Task Force began meeting in January. It has created a regular meeting structure. It identified a Chairperson and a Vice-Chairperson. And it approved rules of procedure to guide how it will conduct its activities. The Task Force has organized three subcommittees to carry out its work: The Community Healing and Engagement Subcommittee is developing strategies and activities that foster a greater deal of meaningful community engagement and healing. Community Policing Subcommittee is reviewing community policing models, learning about best practices, and gathering input from local law enforcement agencies about their approaches to community policing. The Law Enforcement Accountability Subcommittee has been learning about various models of citizen review or oversight of law enforcement agencies in anticipation of proposing an oversight model for the Sonoma County Sheriff's Office, which could be available to other local law enforcement agencies. This subcommittee is also reviewing Coroner Office Programs to learn about various options that will inform their recommendation on whether the Coroner function should be separated from the Sheriff function.

Linda Ortiz:

I'd like to hear some of your challenges. What challenges did the Task Force first encounter, in terms of getting off the ground?

Jennifer Murray:

Well, there are many challenges. The first would be writing a Task Force charter that's clear about what the body is asked to do, what its scope involves, its time-line, and who needs to be consulted as the Task Force develops its recommendation. Another challenge is in identifying what kind of staff support will be needed. In Sonoma County we have a staff support provided by multiple county departments. And pulling your staff team together, understanding their availability, whether you may need to bring in supplemental resources, is all important in determining how you're going to support your Task Force or your Body. Another challenge is in providing a framework, in our case we call it the "Rule the Procedure," to give the Task Force structure. Within those rules, things that you would want to consider with be; what constitutes a majority, or a quorum of members for action to be taken? Who has the authority or the ability to put an item on the agenda for consideration? Another consideration is, who speaks for the task force? Is it only staff? Is it the chairperson? Is it any member the Task Force? So, there are many things to develop clearly before you get in the actual moments of engagement of the Task Force.

Other challenges include assisting your Task Force in understanding what it needs to know in order to develop its recommendations. Are there particular laws or programs that need to provide important background information? For example, we have spent some time learning about how law enforcement agencies approach investigation and response in Critical Incidents. We've learned about something in California called, "The Peace Officer Bill of Rights." We've also spent some time learning about how law enforcement policies are developed. Particularly policies around use the force and around training of officers. Other challenges include communication. How to be clear about your communication with each other. Meaning members of your Task Force. With your governing body. Do you want to put a structure that sets up periodic updates? Or provides written documents? Do you want to use a website? Do you want to use social media to get the word out about various activities or meetings?

Another challenge for us, and though our Task Force is charged with making programmatic recommendations, and not specifically asked to address any issues around the shooting incident that occurred last October, many members of the community are actively engaging the Task Force and its subcommittees to share their views still, at community members, about the current incident as it continues to develop. For example, when the District Attorney's investigation was concluded, the members of the community wanted to voice their views on the two members of the Task Force, though the Task Force has no role in commenting on or informing the District Attorney's outcome. Similarly, the Task Force members are receiving feedback now from the community as they voice perspectives on the Deputy involved in the incident and his return to the field to regular duties.

Linda Ortiz:

I understand this is going to be an ongoing process. Can you tell me a bit about what's the current situation with the Task Force? What's their status at this time?

Jennifer Murray:

Each of the subcommittees is currently developing its recommendations. They're receiving input from members of the community and various stakeholder groups. And they anticipate returning with their recommendations to the Board of Supervisors actually by the 31st of March. So the Board has recognized the complexity of this work and they've given them an additional 90 days to complete their recommendations.

Linda Ortiz:

What's the timeline on that?

Jennifer Murray:

The recommendations are due to the Board of Supervisors by the end of March in 2015.

Linda Ortiz:

What recommendations do you have for anyone trying to create something similar to this in their community?

Jennifer Murray:

I think there are three things to consider in trying to create something in your community. Process. Relationship. And Outcome. By "Process," I mean what will the process be? Who needs to be engaged? How will the work move forward? And does it involve asking individuals to take on a new role that they may not currently have? Such as in appointing a Citizen's Advisory Body. Relationships are very important. How will the members of Body engage with one another? What expectations can they have of one another? What expectations can they have of staff that's supporting them? And how will they work with others in the community if they have already been engaged in some kind of a similar effort before a Task Force was created? And then, "Outcomes." What is it specifically that a Task Force is being asked to do? Who are they making their recommendations to? As well as, who needs to be involved in those recommendations? And then finally, they need to recognize the importance of communication all throughout the process and at all levels.

Linda Ortiz:

Jennifer, I'd like to thank you for being with us today and providing your insight and best practices on all the hard work that you and the community have been doing in Sonoma County.

Jennifer Murray:

You're welcome. And we're also happy to be able to share any of our experiences that have been worn-out difficult and challenging times in our communities and with other communities that may face similar challenges.

Anyone interested in information about the Sonoma County Community and Local Law Enforcement Task Force is welcome to review information about it on our website. The address is:

<http://sonoma-county.org/communitylocallawtaskforce/>

Linda Ortiz:

And visit their Facebook page "Sonoma County Community and Local Law Enforcement Task Force."

Closing Voice Over:

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